

Rain

By Dana Burnet

The rain had fallen for a week; steadily, monotonously, relentlessly. There had been no storm; no bluster of wind.

The sky was a grey mask covering the face of God. In all the world there was no sound but the drip, drip, drip of rain.

Allie Baird stood at her bedroom window, clad in nightdress and faded calico wrapper, her long yellow hair falling over her shoulders. In the distance lay the little Maine fishing village, huddled against the sky, and beyond it the drab reach of the sea. Out of the cluster of wet roofs a lone steeple stood grimly aloft, like a tombstone dominating a graveyard. Allie regarded that steeple with an especial hatred. It belonged to the church she had been married in. . . .

As she stood there shivering with the cold, a desolate picture composed itself in her mind. She saw again the naked wooden altar; heard once more the voice of the lugubrious minister pronouncing sentence upon her soul; felt the cold hand of Jim Baird fumbling for her hand, and the colder embrace of the ring upon her finger. It had rained that day, as it was raining now. Eighteen years! And in all that time only three things of importance had happened to her; first, the birth of her child; second, the death of her child; and third, a trip to Portland for a minor operation. Except for these events, her life had been a barren desert of days.

In the bed behind her a man stirred, and grunted. She turned quickly, gazing down at her husband with a new and critical interest. His huge body bulked large beneath the tumbled coverings; his florid face, with its inevitable stubble of beard, seemed unusually hideous against the untidy pillow. His small eyes leered up at her with that maddening lifelessness, that phlegmatic stare which had begun to sicken her.

“Still raining, Allie?”

“Still raining.”

He had asked that question every morning for a week, and she had answered it in the same way; but this morning her voice trembled. He heard, and scolded her peevishly for her incaution of dress.

“You’ll catch your death, goin’ about in that wrapper. Why don’t you get your clothes on like a sensible woman?”

She did not reply, and he settled into his wallow, with a ponderous groan.

“Ain’t no use my gettin’ up awhile. This rain’s a fust-rate jailer. Call me when breakfast’s ready.”

“I’ll call you, Jim.”

She dressed listlessly, and in silence. The man in the bed began to snore; she went swiftly out of the room, with a little indrawn breath, her hair still hanging loosely down her back.

Entering the kitchen, she laid the fire, lighted it, and set about the business of getting breakfast, only pausing to sip a cup of coffee. This she drank standing at the window, her eyes fixed upon the distant grey blur of ocean that formed the horizon of her world. Suddenly her gaze grew more intent; a dull light flickered in her eyes. She had seen a sail upon the far water, a dragged moth struggling through the rain. . . .

“There, now, Allie, you’ve burnt the bacon! Thought I smelled it scorchin’.”

Jim Baird, in shirt, trousers and grey cotton socks, stood sniffing in the doorway. Having justified his suspicions, he shuffled forward, grumbling.

“Just like you,” he muttered, “always lookin’ out the window and not mindin’ your housework—”

She did not seem to hear the familiar arraignment. Her eyes were still bright with looking out of the window.

“I thought I saw a sail, Jim.”

“Pshaw! What if you did? Ain’t nothin’ to get excited about, is it?”

Still she did not heed the indictment in his tone.

“Look, Jim, isn’t that a schooner out there—off the Point?”

Jim looked, obviously to arm himself with a denial.

“I don’t see no sail,” he stated, positively. Allie smiled, a slow terrible smile.

“You never see the things I see, do you, Jim?”

“I don’t see no schooner off the Point, not in this weather. And you don’t neither, though you’re always sayin’ you do. Soon’s you get a little mite fidgety, you begin seeing ships off the Point. Ain’t you never forgot—”

He stopped, sobered by the expression on her face, and returned querulously to the first charge against her.

“You always was careless and wasteful, Allie,” he complained, prodding the defunct bacon with a mournful forefinger. “Careless and wasteful—with bacon costin’ what it does.”

“It doesn’t cost as much as whiskey!”

“Now, Allie——”

“Whiskey’s the thing that has ruined you, Jim Baird; not my carelessness.”

“Well, now, I ain’t allowin’ that I’m ruined, Allie. The farm still pays expenses, and a little mite over. And as for what you said—you know I ain’t no heavy drinker.”

“I wish to God you were! I wish you’d go out and get drunk like a man, and come home and beat me—if you wanted to! It’s this everlastin’ takin’ it, takin’ it, takin’ it behind my back . . . and then lyin’ to yourself to ease your conscience.”

“Now, Allie, you know that ain’t true. You know I’m subject to colds. The doctor said a drop or two wouldn’t hurt me—”

“He didn’t say to drink a bottle a week!”

“I ain’t drunk a bottle. There’s some . . . Now, Allie, you know I need a tonic. This house’s chilled through. The weather’s murd’rous, plain murd’rous.”

“Don’t say that word!”

She stood over him, her bosom heaving, a pitiful frightened helplessness in her eyes; it was as though she recognised her growing inability to struggle against fate.

Jim Baird looked at her with the faint bravado that is the invariable cloak of cowardice; then he sat down at the table and began to eat, after the manner of his kind.

Allie watched him with a strange horror, a cumulative loathing that was as new in its expression as it was old in its origin. He ate like a beast.

It seemed that this week of bad weather was bringing to the surface many of her hidden emotions, her secret opinions, her long-concealed hatreds. The endless drip of the rain had begun to wear upon her calloused spirit; to rasp her nerves. She could not remember when she had been shut up with him, under one roof, for such a long time before. She wished that he had not said it was murderous weather.

After breakfast he went into the front room—a pathetically drooping chamber filled with ornaments that belied their mission of cheer; the chamber in which was gathered the concentrated dreariness of that house.

From a small cabinet he took a bottle, and drank—not recklessly but rather stingily, as though fearful of imbibing more than was strictly necessary to his intoxication. . . . After which he filled his pipe and sat down by the window.

Allie moved slowly about the kitchen, prolonging as far as possible the washing of the dishes. At last she picked up the carving knife, a long, sharp-bladed affair, and began to scour it with trembling hands. There was an appalling tumult in her heart. The frightened look had returned to her eyes.

Suddenly she lifted her head. The knife fell clattering to the floor. With an air of grim determination she walked into the front room and sat down at her husband’s side.

“Jim—I—want—to talk to you.”

The peaceful vacuity of Jim Baird’s countenance gave place to an uncontrollable peevishness; but he managed an artificial smile.

“All right, Allie, talk ahead. I guess you’re lonesome—is that it?”

“That’s it, Jim. I’m lonesome. And it doesn’t seem right, somehow. It doesn’t seem natural. We’re husband and wife, Jim, and—we ought—to—talk—more. We ought to talk about—”

“The weather?”

“God—no!”

“Then what, Allie?”

She shook her head hopelessly.

“What do other husbands and wives talk about, when they’re shut in together? Are they all like this? If they are, then they’re nothing but *prisoners!*”

“Now, Allie—”

“You’ve got to talk to me, Jim. You’ve got to find something we can share, something we can take an interest in. All our lives we’ve gone along like this. We’re strangers, after eighteen years, and it’s . . . killing me! Oh, Jim, if you’d only try to be a man! If you’d only quit drinking, and go to work again. I mean *real work*, work that *means* something. I’ll help you, Jim! I’ll work with you—”

“Why, Allie, what’s come over you? Ain’t you got three meals a day, and a good bed to sleep in?”

“Yes, but that’s not living. That’s just keeping your body warm. I want something else, something I can look forward to—a trip to Portland maybe, or a new dress, or one of those little autos that don’t cost so much, that I could run myself—”

“An automobile! *An automobile!* Ha! Ha! Ha! Allie Baird wants an automobile. That’s what it’s all about, eh? I knew there was somethin’ on your mind besides the weather. An automobile! God A’mighty, ain’t I got troubles enough, without havin’ a spendthrift wife?”

He had risen from his chair, and was facing her in a sullen fury. She drew back slowly, her arm half lifted as though to ward off a blow. But still she clung to the hopeless dream of making him see, of making him understand.

“It isn’t that, Jim! I swear it isn’t that! I don’t care about having an auto. I only want something that we could take pleasure in—and—and—”

“You lie, Allie Baird! Git back into that kitchen, and be thankful you ain’t walkin’ the streets in the rain—”

Her arms fell to her sides; a dry sob escaped her lips. She turned and went wearily from the room. . . .

In the kitchen she sank down by the window, and put her head on her arms.

It seemed as though the rain had stopped at last. In the orchard behind the rambling old farmhouse, a young girl walked with her lover. The air was sweet with the fragrance of apple-blossoms. The twilight established about them a kingdom of shadows, and infinite solitudes, where they might wander in peace and safety. . .

The man was fair-haired, blue-eyed, with the proud carriage of a young Viking. He was sailing at daybreak for Georges Banks. It was to be his last trip before they were married.

“You’ll be standin’ at the window,” he said, tightening his arm about her waist, “and you’ll see the *Swallow* roundin’ the Point—you can tell her by the canvas she carries! And you’ll put on the ring I gave you, for you’ll know it’s Hartley Taylor comin’ home for his sweetheart—”

“If you shouldn’t come!” she whispered, and swayed against him. He took her in his arms and kissed her.

“I’ll come one way or another,” he said. “One way or another. Wait for me always.”

He went at dawn, in the *Swallow* schooner. She stood at the window, his ring against her lips, watching his sails until they showed no more. . . .

A week later the remnants of the fishing fleet came driving home in the teeth of the gale; but Hartley Taylor did not come, though she watched the Point night and day, all the long winter through. And when the spring came again, and her heart was dead in her breast, she went down to the edge of the great water, and gave his ring to the sea. . . .

The following June, at the urgent request of both her father and mother, she married Jim Baird, who wanted a wife, and was willing to trade for one upon a purely business basis.

Allie awoke with a sigh; her glance involuntarily sought the distant headland, thrust like a welcoming hand into the sea. Was it a sail that she saw, or was it another illusion of her mind?

The ceaseless patter of rain at the window stirred her to full consciousness. Her relaxed nerves tightened. Her brain throbbed with the endless reiteration of the thought that she had been fighting against ever since the dawn.

She cooked dinner, and sat in her chair by the window while Jim Baird ate. She herself did not taste food. The carving knife still lay on the floor between them. The man picked it up, muttering something about her carelessness, and placed it on the table beside her. She did not speak nor turn her head.

He returned to the front room, renewed his miserly dissipations; but now he drank more boldly, with a false courage born of hate. Allie’s plea had shaken him from that numbing lethargy, that sensual refuge into which he had crept for shelter against the very thing she demanded so passionately—*life!* And he raged inwardly at her who had pricked him.

By night he was thoroughly drunk. When she called him to his supper he came reeling, and fell into his chair with a loud laugh that echoed mockingly through the silent house. For some moments he essayed a ghastly humour, making jests about the rain, which he likened to the Flood, vowing that it presaged the end of the world. Allie sat with her back toward him, her body rigid, her hands gripping the chair.

Finally he rose and approached her.

“You told me t’ git drunk—and beat you,” he snarled; and struck her on the cheek with his open hand. “Come t’ th’ table,” he added, breathing hard. “’Tain’t right t’ turn your back on your husband. ’Tain’t—natural.”

To his own maudlin amazement she did exactly as he commanded. She sat down opposite him, leaned her elbows on the table, and looked at him with a smile. It was a smile that lighted her whole countenance, a strange radiance caused by some burning within her breast. It was as though in striking her he had kindled a slumbering spark to flame. Her eyes gleamed. Her cheeks were flushed as with a fever.

That night, for the first time in eighteen years, Allie Baird did not wash the supper dishes. As soon as he had gone, she went upstairs and put on her white dress—the only one she owned beside her monotonous gingham. . . . Then she returned to the kitchen, blew out the lamp, and waited for Jim Baird to go to bed.

The lighthouse on the Point had begun to glow. She kept her gaze upon that distant flame. It steadied her.

The rain fell steadily, monotonously, as it had fallen for days . . . as it had fallen for ages! She heard Jim’s stumbling progress up the stairs, his heavy breathing, his low-voiced growl as he cursed the dark. Still she waited, in her white dress, her hair down her back. Time, that had seemed so interminable to her that morning, was now but an inconsequential trifle.

A clock in the front room struck three, with muffled tones. She rose from her chair, picked up the long-bladed knife, and slowly mounted the stairs.

As she entered the bedroom, a reek of whiskey assailed her nostrils. She felt, rather than saw, her husband’s huge bulk upon the bed. He was sleeping the deep sleep of drunkenness, and he whimpered a little as he breathed. She crept close, leaned down and kissed him. “Poor Jim!” she whispered; then lifting the knife high in air, she drove it home.

She had reached the open window—somehow—and was kneeling before it, her arms across the sill. . . .

A ship was coming for her through the rain, a schooner with all canvas set, plunging through the grey sea of the mist; a white shape afloat upon the air.

The woman at the window smiled, and reached into her bosom for the ring her lover had given her; but the ring was not there.

Then she glanced once more at the oncoming ship, and saw Hartley Taylor standing at the lee-rail, with the ring in his hand, and the light of its single stone filling the world with glory!

“I’ll come . . . one way or another!”

She felt the light upon her face, upon her hair and held out her hands to him in greeting, crying his name across the shriveled waters!

Jim Baird awoke with a start; groaned ponderously and fell back upon his pillow.

“Still rainin’, Allie?”

There was no reply. He glanced toward the window, and saw her kneeling at the sill, in a brilliant flood of sunshine—her head upon her arms and her yellow hair falling about her shoulders like so much spun gold. He began to scold her querulously.

“Now, Allie, you’ll catch your death—”

Something in her stillness checked the words on his lips. He got awkwardly out of bed, his face a mottled grey, and walked slowly toward the kneeling figure.

Suddenly he halted, and stared panic-stricken at a dark stain on the floor. . . . His legs gave way beneath him. He sank into a chair, a growing horror in his eyes.

“Just like you, Allie,” he moaned. “Couldn’t stand a little bad weather. . . . If you’d just waited another day. . . . Sun’s out now!”

He looked once more at that still figure by the window; saw the light on her hair, felt the immeasurable distance between them.

Then he began to sob weakly.